

Prayer: Your word beckons to our spirit, Lord, but our mind and heart begs for a closer look. Prepare a home within us, O Lord, that your word might find a resting place. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Light Exposes Everything

Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21

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Doctors, police, fire-fighters, and pastors all occasionally receive calls in the middle of the night. Some of those calls are more significant than others.

Dr. Robert Ozmont of First United Methodist Church in Atlanta tells about a night when he was awakened by a call about 2:00 a.m. He wasn't familiar with the lady and discovered during the conversation that she had obtained his phone number in the yellow pages. She said that she had a problem but it soon became apparent to Dr. Ozmont that it wasn't an emergency and could probably have waited until the morning to be dealt with.

He did his best to help her. Finally he asked the woman, "Ma'am, do you belong to a church in Atlanta?"

"Yes," was her response. "I am a member of Calvary Presbyterian."

"Why," asked Dr. Ozmont, "didn't you call your pastor about your problem?"

She answered, "I thought about that, but my pastor works so hard that I just hated to bother him in the middle of the night."¹

The story just before the Gospel passage read earlier this morning is about a time when Jesus had a late-night visitor. It's one of two stories it's helpful to know about when trying to understand today's Gospel text.

"Nick at Night" is the title some have penned for this vignette in Jesus' life. Nicodemus was a Pharisee – a member of the ruling class – a politician – a wealthy man – a man used to living his life by fairly strict religious standards. As a Pharisee he had pledged to spend his life observing every detail of the law. He went to see Jesus in the middle of the night some have suggested because it might have been politically embarrassing for him to be seen having a heart-to-heart with an itinerant preacher.

Bible scholars note that it really wasn't all that unusual though for persons to have discussions with rabbis late at night. They point out that while rabbis were available to teach during the day, most students weren't free to study then. So, in a sense, Nicodemus' visit could have actually been proper – respectful of Jesus - by providing him the same courtesy accorded to a rabbi.

The interesting thing about this encounter is not that it took place at night, but rather that it took place at all. It's ordinary people we normally see hanging around Jesus. You know, people who could be standing on any street corner waiting for a bus. Nicodemus was not that kind of person. Despite his position in the community though, he went to talk with Jesus about spiritual matters.

There's another interesting observation some offer about this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus and that is that despite Nicodemus' position – his own understanding of things – he seemed to have gone to Jesus as an honest seeker after the truth. Despite all his honors - all the important positions he held in the community - he knew something was lacking in his life.

And so, Nicodemus and Jesus had this conversation – Nicodemus beginning by acknowledging the impressive things Jesus had done – assuring him of his belief that they would not have been possible unless they were of God. Jesus then offered a corrective to Nicodemus’ compliment noting that the miracles he performed and the teachings he offered weren’t nearly as important as whether people experienced an inner change – a new birth.

Nicodemus, being brought up with a literal and legalistic understanding of the world - misunderstood Jesus’ reference to the new birth and being born again and the discussion seemingly got a little intense. It ended with Jesus challenging – questioning – whether Nicodemus really wanted to understand – really wanted to respond.

Oh, how like Nicodemus we are at times. We often also act as if – talk as if – we want to change, but then excuse ourselves from doing so by lamenting how truly difficult it really is.

Well, Jesus tried again to make the whole thing understandable as he told Nick that he shouldn’t be overly impressed with this concept of being born again – that he shouldn’t marvel about the thing – because he said that it will ultimately happen without his ever knowing it – without effort on his part – that it blows into our lives something like the wind blows – the effect of which can be observed but the source of it and where it goes is really impossible to see.

Another way to put it is: “relax, don’t fret about this being born again – whether you are or not – simply let it happen.”

This brings us to the strange words at the beginning of this morning’s Gospel text and the second story we need to know about. Hear again verses 14 & 15: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that every one who believes in him may have eternal life.” What John is recalling for his readers is the second story we need to know if we are to understand today’s text. It’s the story told in Numbers of the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness.

What happened was the wandering band of Israelites had to take a long detour around Edom and they weren’t very happy about it. They started grumbling – started talking about regretting ever having left Egypt - complained about their lack of food and water and even the manna that had once satisfied them.

When a plague of deadly serpents attacked them they interpreted it as a sign that God wasn’t too happy with them. And so, they confessed to Moses about what they had been saying behind his back and Moses went to bat for them again – he interceded on their behalf. And he told the people that he believed God told him to put a bronze serpent on a pole and to hold it up in the middle of the camp.

Then he said that if anyone who was bitten by a serpent and then looked at the bronze serpent, why, they would live – those who didn’t, would die. It was an impressive story. The Israelites told though how the brazen serpent became an idol and thus there came a day when it had to be destroyed.²

Some challenged this interpretation of the story – they argued that it contradicted what they had been taught about not making graven images. The rabbis explained it this way: “It was not the serpent that killed and gave life. Israel looked, and, so long as Moses lifted up the serpent, they believed on him who had commanded Moses to act thus. It was God who healed them.” The point being that the healing power lay not in the brazen

serpent, but in God. The serpent was only a sign and a symbol – to point – to turn their thoughts to God; and it was when they turned their thoughts to God that they were healed.³

And so, the author of the Gospel of John wrote: “So it is with Christ. We must lift Christ up and when people turn their thoughts to him, and believe in him, they too will find eternal life and salvation. Just as the Israelites were healed by God when they looked to the serpent on the pole, so when people turn their thoughts to Jesus and believe in him, they will find eternal life.” Jesus was still talking with Nicodemus when he made this association. It was as if he was saying to ol’ Nick: “In order to be born again – in order to sense the spirit in your life we have been talking about – you have to keep your eyes and heart upon the son of man – upon me.”

Jesus was on a roll – he didn’t even stop to take a breath – what follows is often said to be, “the whole of the Gospel.” Luther labeled it “The Gospel in miniature.” It’s so famous, it screams out at us on placards at sporting events covered on national TV – John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

John 3:16 is so famous – so well-known – so emphasized – so quoted – that what follows gets lost. And that’s a shame because what follows is every bit as important. We cannot talk about the love of God and the saving acts of Jesus Christ without talking about judgment. But judgment only comes into play based on our reaction to the gift of God. Jesus Christ did not come to condemn. God sent him to save – to show us the way. It is our reaction to the light – to the message – to Jesus Christ – that determines our salvation or condemnation – not the activity of God in Jesus. It’s an important distinction – we dare not overlook what it means for us. “Whoever believes in Jesus Christ is not condemned. Whoever is not afraid to come into the light of Jesus Christ is saved.”

The light is offered to everyone – it exposes everything. We can choose to avoid it for fear our evil will be revealed, or, we can come to the light so that God can be observed to be the source of human achievement – the source of our changing and not being afraid any longer of our dark sides.

Alcibiades, the spoiled young man of genius of Athens, was a companion of Socrates, but every now and then he would shout out: “Socrates, I hate you, for every time I meet you, you let me see what I am.” You see, when we start messing around with Jesus – when we start letting him mess around with us – his life – his light – exposes some deficiencies in us – it exposes everything about us – the dark places in our lives.

In one of Leonard Sweet’s sermons he reflects on that Sunday School song we sang at the beginning of the worship service – *This Little Light of Mine*. The song has three verses and he observes that two of the verses are theologically profound and the third one is theologically bankrupt.⁴

The first verse is the one we sang earlier: *This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.*” Sweet asked in his sermon, “Where does the light shine?” And then he notes that it is in the dark that it shines. Jesus put it this way according to verses 13-16 of the 5th chapter of Matthew: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

And then he highlights Jesus’ words – “You are the light of the ... church? Home? Family? Light? No, ‘You are the light of the world.’” The place where the church is to be is in the world.⁵

Then he reflected on the second verse: *Hide it under a bushel, no, I'm gonna let it shine*. He observed that we too often are guilty as the church of hiding the light inside our walls. He wrote: "We hide the light when ... we're afraid of the culture's racism, sexism, materialism, militarism; we hide the light when ... we confine its glow inside the church walls for a few hours a week; we hide the light when ... we refuse to confront human sinfulness; we hide the light when ... we fail to help in understanding what's happening out there and face up to the world that's actually out there; we hide the light when ... we ignore the 'big, real world out there,' thereby endangering our own little world; we hide the light when ... we ourselves aren't on fire."⁶

Finally he talked about the last verse as being a theologically bankrupt one. *Don't let Satan blow it out, I'm gonna let it shine*. This suggests that somehow we're responsible for making sure the light of Jesus Christ doesn't go out. When we buy into this understanding we start guarding the light – we attempt to preserve it – protect it – by not taking any chances with it.

He sets up his point by retelling the story of little six-year-old Angie and her four-year-old brother, Joel, sitting together in church.

Joel giggled, sang, and talked out loud. Finally his big sister had enough. "You're not supposed to talk out loud in church," she whispered.

Joel asked out loud, "Why not? Who's going to stop me?"

Angie pointed to the back of the church and said, "See those two men standing at the door? They're hushers."⁷

There are people in the world who want to blow out our candles – our light – but we need not fear them – Satan has already been defeated. The powers of sin and death have already been destroyed. There may be times when the flame wavers, flickers, dims – it might even appear to go out once in awhile. But it is our belief that the light is more powerful than the dark – than any puffing or hushing or huffing of Satan's. It's time to quit focusing on preserving the light, protecting it from the dark and wind. The light of Jesus Christ exposes everything if we let it shine and don't hide it and try to protect it.

Let us pray.

1. Dr. Bill Bouknight, "A Vital Night Call," Collected Sermons (ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2002), 0-000-0000-13.
2. William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel According to John (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), pp. 124.
3. Ibid.
4. Leonard Sweet, "Set in the Dark Places," Collected Sermons (ChristianGlobe Networks, 2007), 0-000-1415.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. "Through a Child's Eyes," The African American Pulpit, 5 (Summer, 2002), 19 as quoted in "Set in the Dark Places."